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## **Demolition on tap for medical center**

### **PUSH FOR WRECKING BALL ANGERS NEIGHBORS**

**By Joshua Molina**

**Mercury News**

The owners of the old San Jose Medical Center have filed a request to demolish the former downtown hospital, sparking anger and frustration among neighborhood groups.

Hospital Corporation of America recently submitted an application to knock down the buildings, some built as early as the 1920s, even though community members are tightly locked in a debate over what should be done with the defunct hospital.

“I don't know what HCA is thinking,” said Don Gagliardi, president of the 13th Street Neighborhood Advisory Committee, which wants to bring a new hospital downtown. “It is in bad faith to jump the gun.”

Company officials said they are not trying to sidestep the public process but noted they have no intention of building a new hospital at the site. They also said they are paying \$50,000 a month to secure the facility, keep out the homeless and clean up litter.

“It is in our best interest, as well as the community's, to demolish those old buildings,” said William Gilbert, chief executive at Regional Medical Center of San Jose, which is also owned by HCA. “They are a safety hazard. They are really an eyesore.”

Tensions between neighborhood activists and Nashville-based HCA go back to 2004, when HCA closed the downtown hospital three years earlier than originally promised.

Faced with a state mandate to seismically retrofit or rebuild the hospital, which would have cost hundreds of millions of dollars, the company opted to shut it down. The hospital, like many throughout the state, also was hurt by declining reimbursements from Medicare, Medicaid and private insurers. The facility lost more than \$130 million in 2003.

Since the closure, many neighborhood groups have called for the return of a downtown hospital, while HCA officials say Regional Medical Center, about three miles away, can serve the needs of patients in the area. Non-profit O'Connor Hospital and public Valley Medical Center also are just a few miles from downtown.

But the city council last year created a “Stakeholders Advisory Committee” to consider whether to open a new hospital or smaller urgent-care clinic in the city core. Some advocates say that even if HCA sells the property, another company could run such a facility on part of the site. HCA officials, however, are adamant that they will not sell to anyone who plans to build a full-blown hospital.

Joe Horwedel, the city's director of planning, said the city will not hold any hearings on HCA's request for a demolition permit until the stakeholder meetings are done later this year.

“It came a little bit sooner than the city had anticipated,” Horwedel said of the demolition request, which the company quietly filed last month.

HCA officials said the outcome of the stakeholder meetings won't affect the fate of the buildings.

“We are sure that these buildings can never be used again as another hospital,” said Gary Schoennauer, a San Jose land use and planning consultant working for HCA. “We are fairly convinced that everyone will ultimately agree that whether or not a new hospital or some medical facility is feasible on this property, it won't include these old buildings.”

He added that some members of the public don't seem to grasp the complexities of building a new hospital.

“There tends to be a belief that all it will take is to flip a switch and this old hospital will be reopened, and that is clearly not the case,” Schoennauer said.

The company's stance seems to have inflamed smoldering mistrust among neighbors.

“I don't think they will be successful in trying to railroad or undo the process,” said Joe Pambianco, a member of the stakeholders committee who represents the Julian-St. James Neighborhood Association. He lives about a block away from the old hospital on East Santa Clara Street near Highway 101.

Pambianco criticized the company for submitting its demolition request without notifying the stakeholder committee. “It gives at least the appearance that they are not being forthcoming,” he said.

The move has also ruffled feathers among members of the city council.

“The sight of a wrecking ball will go over in our community about as well as a ‘Gigli’ sequel,” said Councilman Sam Liccardo, whose district includes the hospital. “It won't work wonders for HCA in our community.”

Liccardo said he understands the company's financial pressures, but says that's no excuse for bypassing the public process.

“HCA has an obligation to explain to our community why that building can't be reused as an eventual hospital, and they have not done that,” Liccardo said. “I expect and hope that they will do so.”

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